DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 143 RC 019 270

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TITLE Unemployment and Child Abuse in a Rural Community: A Diverse Relationship.
PUB DATE 22 May 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the National Symposium on Child Victimization (8th, Washington, DC, May 22, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Abuse; Employment Patterns; Family Life; Leisure Time; Parent Child Relationship; *Rural Family; *Seasonal Employment; *Stress Variables; *Unemployment
IDENTIFIERS *Job Stress

ABSTRACT

Both the literature and common beliefs suggest that unemployment increases family stress and child abuse. To test this idea, data were collected on monthly unemployment rate and number of child abuse complaints during 1978-91 in a rural county in the northwestern United States dependent on the lumber industry. Unexpectedly, the data showed that there was a strong negative correlation between unemployment and child abuse. Interviews with 50 families revealed that lumbering activities were usually suspended during the spring thaw, and that this period of anticipated unemployment affected families in positive ways, providing time for leisure activities and parent-child interaction. On the other hand, lumbermen worked long hours during the late summer and families in which child abuse had occurred reported increased job stress and alcohol consumption among men during this time and increased stress for wives from carrying all other responsibilities alone. Suggestions for social-work inverventions during high-stress employment periods include provision of support groups for mothers, parent education, and children's activities. (SV)

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TITLE: UNEMPLOYMENT AND CHILD ABUSE IN A RURAL COMMUNITY: A DIVERSE RELATIONSHIP

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Presented at the Eighth National Symposium of Child Victimization Washington D.C. May 22, 1992

RC 019270

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ABSTRACT

UNEMPLOYMENT AND CHILD ABUSE IN A RURAL COMMUNITY:
A DIVERSE RELATIONSHIP

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This research pertains to myths regarding child victimization and unemployment - understanding the realities of this particular community could lead to puncturing these myths in areas with similar occupational concerns.

The hypothesis for this research was that the rate of child abuse is directly correlated with the unemployment rate. X County in the Inland Northwest was studied. The area has a population of 8,505 and the main source of income is from the lumber industry and Government agencies, mainly the Forestry Service. The monthly number of reported child abuse cases were tallied from the State Department of Health and Welfare between January 1978 through December 1991. They were correlated with the monthly unemployment rates from the State Department of Employment for the same period. This was a multiple subject survey using mean figures to calibrate the Pearsonian Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to determine the level of association. The results of the survey indicated that the hypothesis was not supported by the data collected. In fact, in many instances, there was a directly opposite correlation.

Upon investigation of the geographical and cultural aspects of X County an unanticipated factor appeared, that being, predictable unemployment, which the author had not considered. This study appears to differ significantly from the literature reviewed, however, most research appears to have been done in areas where unemployment was not anticipated and unpredicted. Findings, substantiated by personal interviews indicate in X County where there are seasonal anticipated unemployment periods family stress is less then when employment periods are high.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND CHILD ABUSE: A DIVERSE RELATIONSHIP

To a large extent the prospects for a child depends on what is happening in his/her family. The vast majority of children are members of families and the family is the most important factor in their lives. Home and family are the first conditions of life for the child according to the final report of the White House Conference on Children in a Democracy published in 1940.

These words could have been written today. Children are still dependent upon their families and the family remains to be the most important factor in their lives.

THE PROBLEM

A growing body of literature and research has been accumulating in the past few decades documenting case histories of child abuse within the family. Investigations cite numerous factors. Since unemployment can lead to the low economic status and stress in a family, it seems reasonable to also list that as a factor. However, few studies have been conducted to show the correlation between unemployment and child abuse.

INLAND NORTHWEST STUDY

This research was conducted in a rural Inland Northwest county with a present population of 8,505. When the study

began in 1978 the population was 10,390. The purpose was to explore the correlation between the rate of unemployment with the rate of child abuse.

Unemployment in the Inland Northwest is not a new phenomenon. The lumber industry and Government agencies, i.e. U.S. Forest Service provides the major source of Employment. Approximately 82% of the total labor force comes from these two areas. Every year these employees can anticipate periods of unemployment due to weather conditions. When they are not employed they normally receive unemployment compensation while they wait for the weather to improve. These lay off periods range from two weeks at a time to as long as three months.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Most literary reviews discuss unemployment and its affect on the family. In the nineteen items reviewed most indicated that there was more stress and family problems when unemployment was high. A list of the reviews accompanies this paper.

The review studies were conducted Malay in metropolitan areas where lay offs and a depressed economy often resulted in company closures. These lay offs or closures usually lasted for indefinite periods of time leaving employees uncertain about future work.

In one study conducted by the Upjohn Institute for

Employment Research from 1977 through 1982 it was found that the level of relative economic depravation was related to duration of unemployment. Family stress was less when the duration of unemployment was not more than fifteen weeks (approximately four months).

In a paper presented by Peter Coolson in 1982 for the Nation Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse in Chicago on the Relationship of Child Abuse to the Workplace he discusses the kinds of stress experienced by working parents. Further, how work is a deterrent to child abuse and job stress and family violence. He described some preventative strategies to help employers and employees.

These two studies have some similarities and verify findings of this study, however, anticipatory unemployment was not used as a variable.

METHODOLOGY

At the first writing of this research in 1982, the hypothesis was that the rate of child abuse was directly correlated with the rate of unemployment. However this hypothesis has not been substantiated over the fourteen years from 1978 through 1991 considered by this study.

This is a multiple subject survey in which mean figures were used to calibrate the Pearsonian Product Moment Correlation coefficient to determine the level of

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association. The monthly figures of reported child abuse complaints were from the State Health and Welfare Department, Family and Children Services. These reports include the complaints of physical, emotional sexual abuse and neglect. Monthly revised and unadjusted unemployment figures were obtained from the State Department of Employment. Revised and unadjusted rates are the truest figures as to how many employees are not working at any given time.

Data is illustrated on bar graphs and pie charts to illustrate and compare monthly and yearly mean figures.

FINDINGS

Generally during the months of high employment rates there was in increase in child abuse complaints. There was no consistent increase in child abuse complaints during the predictable months of high unemployment.

The data indicates that March and April have the highest rates of unemployment due to a local predictable condition known as Spring "breakup". This is when temperatures rise from freezing and road surfaces crack so that travel by heavy equipment, i.e. logging trucks, has to be restricted. Wooded areas also become soft and muddy making them impossible to work in. August and September has the lowest unemployment rate. August and September typically have the highest number of child abuse complaints.

In 1982 April had the highest number of child abuse complaints and the highest rate of unemployment during the first 5 years considered. There was an unusual nationwide decrease in the woods product market during that year. Numerous local mills ceased with no anticipated reopening date. The population of the area has decreased by 1,785 persons since 1982 however the percentage of lumber industry employees and Government agency employees has increased.

Using the mean figures of the monthly rates of unemployment and child abuse to calibrate the Pearsonian Product Moment Correlation coefficient to determine the true association, the result was -0.788. This indicates a fairly strong negative correlation which at this point appears to be a predictable indication for future years.

During months of employment the lumbermen work long hours. In the summer it is not uncommon for them to work from sunrise until sunset. In the winter when the ground is frozen they often go on what is known as "hoot owl" shifts which can begin at 3:00 AM before thawing begins. Generally these employees work long, hard hours.

The Forestry Service hires numerous temporary employees to plant trees, supervise recreation and fight forest fires in the summer and fall. Maintenance of and regulating logging practices takes place at the same time the lumber employees are working and this slacks off in accordance with each other.

Families in which child abuse had occurred were questioned about the affect employment and unemployment had on the family. One mother stated that when her husband worked long hours (up to fourteen hours a day) she felt under pressure to keep the children quiet so her husband could sleep when he did come home. One child would not "shut up" at 7:00 PM one August evening and she almost beat the child to death. She also stated that she was expected to do everything for the family of six and rarely had a break when her husband was away. Her husband also abused the children when he was working long hours because the mother claimed he often came home tired, feeling under pressure and some times he had to repair his equipment before the morning. He usually had consumed 3 or 4 beers while driving home. She claimed he looked forward to the Spring "breakup" like a kid looks forward to Summer break.

Anticipated unemployment generally affected the family in positive ways.

Of the 50 families interviewed the majority claimed they saved money for the anticipated lay off period and most collected unemployment compensation. They spent the time making needed repairs on equipment and homes at their leisure. They spent time with the children and took them with them for sports outings and watched TV together. They were generally more relaxed because they slept more hours. They drank (alcohol) less because they were not around their

"buddies" so much and also felt they needed to "watch their money". Some planned vacations with their family. One family has a yearly trip to Hawaii. Many would participate in their favorite sports including: snowmobiling, skiing, fishing and hunting. One logging foreman sponsors baseball teams and games. One logger claimed he looked forward to the time to buy an expensive item, i.e. a car or new chainsaw because he had plenty of time to "shop around".

There is little, if any, local community stigma for being unemployed during the Spring "breakup" because the majority of employees are laid off. Year round Forest Service employees like to take their vacations at this time which is slower for them. Schools allow students to take work home or on vacations. Business merchants profit by these laid off employees who spend time shopping and filling the restaurants at all hours of the day usually discussing the weather.

They all said they anticipated the lay off to last no more than 2 to 3 months. If it was longer their financial and emotional stress rose and it would become difficult to remain unemployed. One woodsman claimed that he liked a (planned) month off, however, if it was extended or came at an unanticipated time it "drove him crazy".

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

In this Inland Northwest community and those where

anticipated lay off periods occur, Social Workers should be aware that families tend to be more cohesive and often experience less stress. During the months of high employment, primarily the summer and mid winter months, workers need to be aware of the added family stress. They could encourage mothers to form networking systems with other women. Baby sitting and day care services should be made available. Parenting classes and problem solving groups could be offered to help mothers discuss their concerns and frustrations. Supervised play areas and childrens' groups, i.e. 4-H and activity groups could be organized. Employers could be encouraged to have stress reduction classes or give our information on company and agency counseling services. Employees could be encouraged to become aware of how long hours affect their bodies and minds. They need to find alternatives for dealing with the stresses rather than with alcohol or violence.

With the knowledge that unanticipated unemployment, lengthy lay off periods and high employment create stress on families Social Workers, law enforcement, and other helping agencies could become more effective by anticipating periods of heightened child abuse rates and planning for them.

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